



# CHALMERS AND GLADSTONE :

## AN UNRECORDED EPISODE

W. FORBES GRAY, F.R.S.E., F.S.A. (SCOT.).

THE centenary year of the death of Thomas Chalmers, "the most illustrious Scottish Churchman since John Knox," declared the late Lord Rosebery, with a touch of oratorical licence, seems an appropriate occasion to explicate an unexplored chapter of Victorian biography, viz., the intimate and mutually stimulating relations that subsisted for some years between Chalmers and Gladstone.

A significant indication of Chalmers's influence in moulding the stately mind of Gladstone is the fact that, but for the lectures which the Scottish Churchman delivered to fashionable audiences in London in 1838, the most controversial, as it was the most ineffectual, of all Gladstone's ecclesiastical writings (their ineffectiveness admitted by the author himself in maturer years), *The State in its Relations with the Church*, probably would not have been written. There had been personal contact before this period, and with the passing of the years a singularly beautiful friendship developed. Yet, strange to say, the friendship, though made the subject of casual reference, is nowhere told with sufficient fullness to make possible an objectively revealing picture.

In the authorised *Life of Chalmers*. Dr. Hanna makes no mention of the incident, nor does Gladstone's name appear in the volume of Chalmers's correspondence. An inkling, however, is given in Lord Morley's biography of the statesman, where an autobiographic note is quoted, in which Gladstone says he "had had the honour of a good deal of acquaintance [with Chalmers] during winter residences in Edinburgh and some correspondence by letter." Yet in Lathbury's *Letters on Church and Religion of W. E. Gladstone*, where one would naturally suppose evidence of such a correspondence would be forthcoming, not a single epistle to Chalmers appears.

Gladstone's remark about "some correspondence by letter" puts the matter mildly, since I was once privileged to inspect more than a score of the statesman's letters to Chalmers of which transcripts were given me. These epistles, it was evident, represented only a portion of what must have been an illuminating interchange of views relating to the affairs of

the Church of Scotland immediately prior to the Disruption. The letters were written between 1833 and 1841—for Chalmers the period of the Ten Years' Conflict, for Gladstone the time of the growth of the Tractarian movement, and the years when his churchmanship took definite shape. The correspondence for the most part deals with political measures in which Chalmers was interested. In brief, the latter seems to have confided his ecclesiastical schemes to Gladstone, who did what he could to influence Sir Robert Peel on their behalf. But besides these letters, there are others of a less formal character.

## I

When the friendship began and how it originated cannot be stated with certainty. Gladstone was a five-year-old when his parents took him to Edinburgh in 1814. His next visit to the Scottish capital was in the spring of 1828, just before he went up to Oxford. On that occasion he spent several weeks in the city, and though it is not improbable that he saw Chalmers, there is nothing to warrant the statement that he then made his acquaintance, or even heard him preach.

The latter experience appears to have been reserved for the year 1830 when the young churchman, greatly daring, entered a Baptist chapel to listen to a sermon by Chalmers, then acclaimed one of the foremost preachers of the age. Gladstone writes to his father on 27th October, 1830 :—

Dr. Chalmers has been passing through Oxford, and I went to hear him preach on Sunday evening, though it was at the Baptist chapel. . . . I need hardly say that his sermon was admirable and quite as remarkable for the judicious and sober manner in which he enforced his views as for their lofty principles and piety. He preached, I think, for an hour and forty minutes.

Apparently Gladstone's appraisal of Chalmers was already full grown. Most likely the acquaintanceship dates from the autumn of 1833. In August of that year Gladstone visited Fasque for the first time, his father's estate in Kincardineshire. Later, he proceeded to Edinburgh, where he resided for part of the winter with his parents in a house in Atholl Crescent. In Gladstone's diary, under date 13th December, there is this illuminating entry : " Breakfast with Dr. Chalmers. His modesty is so extreme that it is oppressive to those who are in his company, especially his juniors, since it is impossible for them to keep their behaviour in due proportion to his. He was on his own subject, the Poor Laws—

very eloquent, earnest, and impressive. Perhaps he may have been hasty in applying maxims drawn from Scotland to a more advanced stage of society in England."

The intercourse, in spite of fundamental differences on ecclesiastical matters, grew in cordiality and only ceased with Chalmers's death. The youthful Anglican and the elderly Presbyterian divine breakfasted together frequently, and animated conversations, it may be supposed, took place between them, during long walks in the suburbs of Edinburgh. In an address on Chalmers the late Lord Rosebery used these words:—

We rarely drove between Edinburgh and Dalmeny without Mr. Gladstone pointing out with affectionate interest the spot where, when they were walking together on the Queensferry Road, Dr. Chalmers's hat had been blown off across a dyke and the future statesman had had to run a considerable distance to catch it.

Of these country walks with Chalmers Gladstone himself was delightfully reminiscent after a lapse of nearly sixty years.

On one of our walks together Chalmers took me down to see one of his districts by the Water of Leith, and I remember we went into one or more of the cottages. He went in with smiling countenance, greeted and being greeted by the people, and sat down. But he had nothing to say. He was exactly like the Duke of Wellington, who said of himself that he had no small talk. His whole mind was always full of some great subject, and he could not deviate from it. . . . So after some time we came away, Dr. Chalmers pleased to have been with the people, and they proud to have had the Doctor with them.

Of Gladstone's profound respect for Chalmers personally, a respect amounting to veneration, there can be no question: he could hardly get language to express the warmth of his feelings. "One of Nature's nobles; his warrior-grandeur, his rich and glowing eloquence, his absorbed and absorbing earnestness, above all his singular simplicity and detachment from the world." It is Gladstone, too, who alludes to the "zealous and truly noble propagandism of Dr. Chalmers, a man with the energy of a giant and the simplicity of a child."

Chalmers was in the habit of subscribing his letters to his youthful admirer "respectfully" or "most respectfully yours," and Gladstone was puzzled as to a "suitable mode of subscription to use in return"



## II

The correspondence inspected by me belongs, as I have said, to the years 1833-1841, the period, it will be noted, covering the growth of the Tractarian movement and the time when Gladstone's religious opinions were very definitely High Church. Apart from their strongly ecclesiastical flavour, Gladstone's letters exhibit a deep and abiding attachment. It is unfortunate that Chalmers's side of the correspondence is not forthcoming, but it is not difficult to conjecture that it would be in harmony with the laudatory terms which characterise Gladstone's references to Chalmers.

The earliest letter belongs to the year 1833, and was sent from his father's residence in Edinburgh. It is in the following terms:—

My dear Sir,

If it be not presuming too much upon the permission which your kindness gave me, I propose to appear to-morrow morning at your breakfast hour; but if my visit would then be unseasonable, pray send a verbal message to prevent it.

I remain, dear Sir, with great respect,

Yours truly and obliged,

W. E. Gladstone.

Whether the future statesman breakfasted with Chalmers, as proposed, is uncertain, but there is no dubiety about his having done so on 8th January, 1834. Later in the day he attended one of Chalmers's Divinity lectures and was "more than ever struck with the superabundance" of the lecturer's "gorgeous language."

One of the early letters testifies to Gladstone's interest in Chalmers's work among the Edinburgh slums. "I have seen and read the report in the *Edinburgh Advertiser* of the Town Council's proceedings, and the report made by their Committee relating to the proposed church in the Cowgate, and although the changes they require are certainly important, yet I would hope they may be so arranged as to enable you (i.e., Chalmers) to carry your laudable and desirable measure into effect."

Gladstone, I take it, is alluding here to what came to be known as the "Territorial Scheme." The evangelisation of the masses was, as every one knows, dear to the heart of Chalmers, and when the turmoil of the Disruption had partially subsided, he threw himself with ardour into the labours of earlier years, fixing upon the West Port, then a poor and degraded part of Edinburgh, as the scene of his operations.

## III

In 1835 Gladstone was acting as the medium between Chalmers and Sir Robert Peel regarding the affairs of the Church of Scotland. In one epistle the young Parliamentarian refers to "the mark of confidence which you (i.e., Chalmers) have bestowed upon me in entrusting to my care your application to Sir R. Peel," and in another he intimates that he has written to the private secretaries of Peel and Wellington "in conformity with your note."

When it became clear, as the result of Chalmers's efforts, that new churches were to be built in Scotland, an appeal was made to the Government for aid in their upkeep. Peel's Administration was sympathetic, and legislation to implement the request of Chalmers and others was foreshadowed. But the churches outside the Establishment protested, which made the Government hesitate. At this juncture, unfortunately for the appeal, the Government went out of office, and Melbourne returned to power.

On 26th January, 1835, Gladstone informed Chalmers that he had "this day been offered the Under-Secretaryship for the Colonies," and had, "perhaps it will be thought rashly, accepted it." Two months later he pled with the Scottish churchman not to suppose "that I can ever regard an extension of my correspondence with you as other than an honour and a satisfaction." Again, on 28th May of the same year: "Lord Stanley, I fear, can by no means command the whole of his 'section' in reference to his cardinal principle, the inviolability of Church property. It is a fearful subject, and interminable when once fairly opened. May God send a happy issue to all our feuds and troubles."

In a letter, dated Fasque, 1st October, 1835, a letter full of reverential feeling, Gladstone informs Chalmers of the death of his mother.

My dear Sir,

By my father's desire I write to express his regret that it escaped him to give directions at an earlier period for your being apprised of the visitation which has lately befallen us in the removal of my dear Mother from among us. Her presence among us was one of joy, her life one of faith and its appropriate virtues, and she has left us, along with the consciousness of a heavy and afflictive loss, the fullest measure of consolation which the love and the promises of God afford.

Her departure took place at a little after midnight in the night of the 22nd ult. The immediate cause was an attack of erysipelas,

which lasted for sixteen days and which did not cause us any alarming apprehensions until within the last four.

I hope that you have been profiting largely by your recess for the re-establishment of your strength, as also that Mrs. and Miss Chalmers are in good health.

With my father's kind regards, to which I beg to add my own,

I remain, my dear Sir, with great respect,

Sincerely yours,

W. E. Gladstone.

There is more about Church matters in a letter, dated 27th February, 1836. Gladstone writes to know "what arrangements you (i.e., Chalmers) propose to make relative to the patronage of the churches to be erected in Scotland under your Church Extension scheme, whether endowed by Government or from other sources." Then on 24th March he intimates that he has "now spoken to Sir R. Peel on the subject of your letter."

Chalmers had been pressing Gladstone for news as to Parliamentary action regarding the Chair of Divinity in Edinburgh University, and received the reply that he (i.e., Gladstone) hoped "to have an opportunity of explaining to you why no progress has been made by other means this year towards the adjustment of a case involving such grievous and extraordinary hardship as your own connection with the Chair which you occupy."

Two years later, 10th May, 1838, Gladstone writes from the House of Commons, intimating that his father is anxious that Chalmers should request a "Mr. Buchanan" to obtain for him (i.e., Sir John Gladstone) "plans and dimensions of the land he speaks of on the Coal Hill [Leith] with copies of the specific offers to which he (i.e., Buchanan) refers." This may have been the first mention of a building project which eventuated in 1840 when Sir John Gladstone bought the seventeenth-century mansion of the Logans of Sheriff Brae in the Coal Hill, together with the grounds, and on the site erected the present St. Thomas's Church as a memorial of his own and his father's connection with Leith. Thomas Gladstone, the grandfather of the statesman, was for many years an elder in North Leith Church.

#### IV

The relations between Chalmers and Gladstone appear to have culminated in 1838. In that year Chalmers delivered in London his memorable lectures in vindication of ecclesiastical establishments, which, as already



indicated, were the immediate origin of Gladstone's famous book, *The State in its Relations with the Church*. The author then was member for Newark, "the rising hope" of the "stern and unbending Tories," as Macaulay describes him, or, in Carlyle's vivid words to Emerson, "an Oxford crack scholar, Tory M.P., and devout Churchman of great talent and hope."

It is difficult nowadays to account for the intense excitement evoked in ecclesiastical circles by Chalmers's appearance in the citadel of Anglicanism as the champion of religious establishments, a phase of his creed which, it is curious to reflect, he himself discarded when the logic of events drove him into the camp of the enemy. But in 1838 Chalmers had not the shadow of a doubt that his position as regards church establishments was unassailable.

Thus it was that Anglicans mustered in full force to listen to so able, eloquent and resourceful a defender of their cause. Among them was Gladstone who had great expectations that the Scottish Churchman would carry all before him. The whole scene is graphically recalled by the statesman's biographer.

The rooms in Hanover Square were crowded to suffocation by intense audiences mainly composed of the governing class. Princes of the blood were there, high prelates of the church, great nobles, leading statesmen, and a throng of members of the House of Commons, from both sides of it. The orator was seated, but now and again in the kindling excitement of his thought, he rose unconsciously to his feet, and by ringing phrase or ardent gesture roused a whirlwind of enthusiasm.

From another authority there is the testimony that Chalmers's London lectures probably "afforded the most remarkable illustration of his extraordinary power, and must be ranked among the most signal examples of oratory in any age," a judgment that does not err on the side of understatement.

At the outset Gladstone ranked as a "loyal hearer," as became one whose attitude towards Chalmers hitherto had been eulogistic, but as the lecturer developed his theme his admiration became seriously qualified, and before the conclusion Gladstone was convinced that the basis of the lectures was "totally unsound," indeed so opposed to his own view that he determined there and then to enter the lists against Chalmers with a carefully buttressed and comprehensive reply. In a



letter to Manning, dated 14th May, 1838, he expresses bitter disappointment :

Such a jumble of church, un-church, and anti-church principles as that excellent and eloquent man, Dr. Chalmers, has given us in his recent lectures no human being ever heard. . . . He flogged the apostolical succession grievously, seven bishops sitting below him—London, Winchester, Chester, Oxford, Llandaff, Gloucester, Exeter—and the Duke of Cambridge incessantly bobbing assent. He then turned round on the cathedrals plan and flogged it with at least equal vigour. He has a mind keenly susceptible of what is beautiful, great, and good ; tenacious of an idea once grasped, and with a singular power of concentrating the whole man upon it. But unfortunately I do not believe he has even looked in the face the real doctrine of the visible church and the apostolical succession, or has any idea what is the matter at issue.

Little did Chalmers think that Nemesis was already at the door in the person of the young man with whom he had had so much congenial conversation in Edinburgh. Yet so it was. Gladstone's High Churchmanship rebelled against what he calls Chalmers's "heresies," and the future statesman at once braced himself to the task of writing a book in which they would be boldly impugned, and, as he thought, effectually disposed of.

This literary performance was gone about with "uncommon vigour and persistency." Chalmers's lectures were delivered in May, and by the third week of July Gladstone had finished the draft of *The State in its Relations with the Church*. The manuscript was dispatched forthwith for revision to his friend, James Hope. More ultra-Catholic than Gladstone, Hope was trenchantly critical, and pointed out numerous defects incidental to a hurriedly-prepared manuscript. Indeed, Lord Morley will have it that "Hope took as much trouble with the argument and structure of the book as if he were its author."

## V

To narrate fully the history and contents of a book the leading principles of which Gladstone eventually saw reason to discard, or at least to modify substantially, would be tedious and perhaps irrelevant. Here I am concerned only with the bearing of the book on the doctrines enunciated by Chalmers. At the outset Gladstone alludes to "the grave and positive faults" which appear to him to attach to the theories propounded by certain writers on the subject. As to Chalmers, his "profuse and brilliant eloquence" and "warm heart" contributed to render "the *scientific*

form of his conclusions less accurately discernible than it would have been had he written more apathetically."

The weakness of Chalmers's position was, so Gladstone thought, patent enough. For one thing, the whole subject was not exhibited, while the propositions put forward contained "much questionable matter." Chalmers was "hardly successful" in showing, on his own principles, that "his territorial establishment must be of one denomination." Similarly, "he would probably find it impossible, upon stricter investigation, so to define Evangelical Protestantism as to make it a universal criticism for the guidance of Governments."

Chalmers's capital blunder, however, was his "omitting from his calculation the divine constitution of the Visible Church." By so doing, he "had surrendered the condition without which all others fail." Nor had Chalmers stopped to inquire "whether it would be easy or the reverse to reject the unevangelical Protestants." Furthermore, he had "very greatly underrated the difficulty of the questions at issue between the Church of Rome and her opponents."

But laying bare the weak points (as he conceives them) of Chalmers's polemical armour, Gladstone finds distasteful. He writes: "It is painful even to indicate points of difference from a most distinguished and excellent man, who has done his subject and his country permanent service by his lucid and powerful explanations of the machinery of a religious establishment."

In fullness of time Gladstone was disillusioned as Chalmers was disillusioned. The doctrine expounded in his book that the State has a conscience capable of distinguishing between truth and error in religion and is therefore bound to give official and financial support to the true religion and none other—that doctrine was rudely shaken when civil offices were bestowed on Nonconformists, not excluding Roman Catholics, while men of no religious profession had seats in Parliament. And so it came about that Gladstone ultimately resiled from extreme High Churchism and gradually passed to the acceptance of freedom of religious belief.

## VI

Although *The State in its Relations with the Church* was naturally a disturbing factor, Chalmers remained on friendly terms with the author. At the beginning of 1840 he sent Gladstone his pamphlet entitled "What ought the Church and the People of Scotland to do now?" The first appeal to Parliament to terminate the position whereby the civil courts interfered with the spiritual jurisdiction of the Church of Scotland, had

failed. That the rights of the people should be ignored was, it need hardly be said, a great blow to Chalmers, who in his pamphlet bewails "the blasting of all my fondest hopes for the good and peace of our Church, in my correspondence with public and parliamentary men."

In acknowledging Chalmers's communication, Gladstone attempts to pour oil on the troubled waters, but stresses "the very great difficulties of the case." Here is the text of his letter :—

I would render you my cordial thanks for your charitably continuing to believe, as I trust and infer that you do, that the question is to me one of the liveliest concern, and that I approach, and have endeavoured to make myself acquainted with it under the influence of a lively desire that, amidst the very great difficulties of the case, justice may be done, and that the fair, though of course no more than the fair, results of those Presbyterian principles which the Constitution has recognised with reference to Scotland, may be allowed to take effect. And most earnestly do I hope, for the sake of that principle of national religion to which we are all deeply attached, as well as for the sake of the many positive advantages which that country enjoys through the medium of the Established Church, and of the spirit which actuates her ministers in general, that the effort which, unless I am misinformed, you with some others are making for the accommodation of one of the most difficult and one of the most threatening of all existing controversies, may with and by God's blessing be successful.

I should not allow this opportunity of addressing you to pass without assuring and endeavouring to convince you of the deep pain with which I have found myself at variance upon some ecclesiastical questions from one as distinguished for the highest qualities as yourself, did I not feel that I was addressing a man who would concur with me in acknowledging, and in acting upon, the principle that we must use our best endeavours to follow Truth whithersoever she may lead us, disregarding all human aspects in comparison of that primary duty.

It is unfortunate that the correspondence is so fragmentary. One could have wished for more light on an attractive episode in the lives of two great men—Chalmers, whose sun had almost set, captivating by the sheer uplifting power of exalted character and expansive outlook, and Gladstone, in early manhood and on the threshold of a resplendent career, yielding homage, none the less sincere because it was qualified by basic differences on matters of Church and State.

